

Go With the Flow on River Management

[Food & Environment](#) | [Alan Moran](#)

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Late last year the World Wildlife Fund and a group of CSIRO officials formed the Wentworth Group. They issued a paper, *Blueprint for a living continent*, which proclaimed our land management was causing our rivers to die and our topsoil to blow away, threatening our future capacity to farm.

The Wentworth Group is the spearhead of a high powered campaign calling for action to 'save the Murray'. The crucible of the campaign is a catechism of doom about salinity in the Murray Basin. The Murray Darling is Australia's most prized agricultural province accounting for thirty percent of farm output. It is a 'working river' system that has been radically changed since European settlement. But it remains swimmable and fishable. Its natural flow once regularly flooded a great deal of Victoria then dried to a series of linked ponds. Because of dams it now has a steady flow with great benefits to boaters and anglers as well as agriculture. It is even flowing today in the middle of a one in a hundred year drought.

The Murray Darling basin has naturally salty soils. This innate salinity was observed with dismay by the early European explorers (indeed, the original name for the Darling was the Salt River).

Notwithstanding frequent dark forebodings about increased salinity, careful management and impressive engineering works have restrained the river's salinity. Upstream of Morgan in South Australia, salinity levels have been reduced over the past twenty years, and now are at the levels observed in 1938 when salinity was first measured. Hence for 1,500 kilometres the river's agriculture has not adversely impacted salinity, which is evident only for the last 200 kilometres in South Australia.

Similarly, there is no data to support claims that river usage is threatening to eradicate native animals and plants. In fact, the Murray Darling Basin Commission has only recently embarked on a systematic appraisal of the environmental health of the system.

Hence there is little evidence to justify a need for drastically curtailing productive agricultural uses of the river to bolster environmental flows designed, for example, to flush out salt and increase floods of forested areas. Yet a chorus of voices wants Murray Darling water to be redirected from productive uses to such flows. Simon Crean has endorsed plans to divert 1,500 gegalitres, some twenty per cent of the irrigators' water in the Murray system to environmental flows. Meg Lees has now stepped on board and is contemplating support for the sale of Telstra in return for funds to buy back farmers' water. Even Peter Costello has got into the action with a recent threat to withhold state governments' competition payments unless they embark on reforms that include turning some irrigation water into environmental flows.

For its part, the South Australian Government announced initiatives to 'save the Murray' in its recent budget. This includes only \$40 million to be spent on environmental flows, a sum that would buy less than one fiftieth of the amount claimed as necessary to be put back into the river.

All this is in the context of the vital role Murray Darling basin and its irrigated agriculture plays within the Australian economy. In conflict with measures that would reduce its productivity, governments also plan to turn southern Australia into the supermarket of Asia.

Such plans aside, irrigated agriculture associated water uses along the Murray Darling have brought a measure of affluence to the regions towns. Unlike most other inland Australian towns and cities,

Shepperton, Echuca, Swan Hill, Deniliquin, Cohuna and half a dozen other Murray towns have thrived.

This is only because of the availability of irrigation water from the Murray and the rights to the water that farmers presently have. The water rights themselves are crucial to allow funds to be borrowed for land improvement and agricultural infrastructure. They are particularly vital to those farmers growing high value perennial crops like grapes and citrus.

Yet, compounding the potential for poor government policy decisions on water usage, some governments are also questioning the firmness of these rights. Of course, if the rights can be portrayed as something less than a property right, governments will feel justified in taking them with little compensation. This has additional troubling implications, particularly for the thriving Victorian, New South Wales and South Australian agricultural communities in the Murray Darling Basin. Placing in doubt farmers' property rights to water will undermine incentives to invest in increased productivity. This would rebound on the prosperity of farming communities which can be destroyed far more quickly than the painstaking way they have developed.

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